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Shifting Screenwriting — The Past, Present and Future of the Craft

An Introduction to a Special Issue “A Conversation Beyond the Script”

Abstract

Although the status of screenwriter and screenplay was always uncertain, today's precipitous technological and economic changes are affecting its essence - however, history teaches us that no crisis is so deep that it cannot be turned into opportunity. Bunch of detailed analysis forming the core of this special issue of *Illuminace* can be read as illustration of this overarching simple idea, an invitation to one of the less explored territories and as call for both another adventurous journeys to the roots of screenwriting and erudite reflections of current screenwriting practices made by scholars, screenwriting teachers and authors. In this text, we offer a perspective on how to view the articles in this special issue in the context of the current challenges facing screenwriting. At the same time, we find in these articles a vision for overcoming the crises of the present. The fact that we are experiencing changes in screenwriting means that it will be with us for years to come.

Keywords

screenwriting, screenplay, screenwriter, Screenwriting Research Network, artificial intelligence, Writers Guild of America, cinema, television, virtual reality, sound

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Since *Illuminace's* last issue on screenwriting (4/2014), the field has shifted from professional challenge to almost existential crisis. Especially the recent Writers Guild of America (WGA) strike was less a dispute over remuneration than a battle for the nature of screenwriting work, fueled by anxieties central to a screenwriter's career: declining job opportunities, the reduction of the number of screenwriters in the writer's room that prevent

on-set experience, and the erosion of apprenticeship pathways.¹⁾ This dismantles the traditional ladder of advancement, leaving writers stranded in a gig economy that values speed over mentorship. Looming over all of this is the rise of artificial intelligence (AI). We now face a possible future where generative AI could flood the market with formulaic scripts, devaluing human creativity.

Although screenwriting is going through turbulent uncertain times once again, academic research of this unique craft continually flourishing — as authors of *The Palgrave Handbook of Screenwriting Studies*, one of the most representative, essential overviews of current directions in screenwriting research area, aptly summarized:

In the last two decades, screenwriting scholarship has investigated non-conventional textual/scripting practices, discussed serial/multistrand drama formats, and approached screenwriting for animation and newer media such as videogames and VR. The screenplay has been theorized as proof of concept, database, boundary, liminal, or transitional object. Scholars have carried out ethnographies; developed screenwriting pedagogies; studied particular national and political contexts; elaborate postcolonial, transcultural and transnational approaches; considered ethics and morality, and discussed screenplays and screenwriting with regard to gender, race, and sexual identities. They have also proposed a range of new research tools and methods.²⁾

And we can add that traditional approaches such as representation theory then take on a new dimension when presented by theorizing screenwriters, becoming a means of reflecting on their own approach to writing and enabling them to formulate assumptions about how to write in a different way.

As one of the major outlets for the growing body of research and effective device for boosting interest in screenwriting history, theory and practice for many years serve annual Screenwriting Research Network Conference which took place in Olomouc, Czech Republic, in 2024. Its topic was broad, labeled “A Conversation Beyond the Script,” and the

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- 1) As evidenced by the summary of negotiations between the WGA and AMPTP dated May 1, 2023, just before the strike began, producers completely rejected proposals to set a minimum number of screenwriters in the writers’ room and the duration of their employment on the project. “WGA Negotiations — Status as of May 1, 2023,” *wga.org*, accessed September 10, 2025, https://www.wga.org/uploadedfiles/members/members_info/contract-2023/WGA_proposals.pdf.
 - 2) Rosamund Davies, Paolo Russo, and Claus Tieber, “Introduction,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Screenwriting Studies*, eds. Rosamund Davies, Paolo Russo, and Claus Tieber (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 3. From academic literature published since 2014, see for example bunch of other accounts from Palgrave Macmillan publishing house such as Kathryn Millard, *Screenwriting in a Digital Era* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Chris Pallant and Steven Price, *Storyboarding: A Critical History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Adam Ganz and Steven Price, *Robert de Niro at Work: From Screenplay to Screen Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Alexandra Ksenofontova, *The Modernist Screenplay: Experimental Writing for Silent Film* (London: Palgrave, 2020); Craig Batty and Stayci Taylor, eds., *Script Development: Critical Approaches, Creative Practices, International Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Stayci Taylor and Craig Batty, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Script Development* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Kath Dooley and Alex Munt, eds., *Screenwriting for Virtual Reality: Story, Space and Experience* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024); or Eva Novrup Redvall, *Writing and Producing for Children and Young Audiences: Cases from Danish Film and Television* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

current issue of *Iluminace* follows up. In the context of all shifts affecting the present screenwriting (and sketching its possible futures), our goal was among other things to stress the importance of different types of dialogues, discussions and transfers between people, institutions, artistic domains and technologies. Despite the fact that situating screenwriting to multi-leveled crossroads of this kind represents specific research challenge on its own, given complex perspective repeatedly confirmed its potential and is still able to generate valuable results: bring new knowledge that change our understanding of the screenplay and screenwriter, of what happens during the development of any non/narrative content, and which is able to portray screenwriting into considerable extent also as art of constant, ongoing negotiations (usually democratic in nature), not only about each detail of future work. The theme of in-between, transgressive topics and connecting is expressed in an even more abstract form by the theme of the Screenwriting Research Network Conference 2025 in Adelaide, Australia — The Hyphen.³⁾

It is vitally important to stress that screenwriting history and theory, at least as conducted in the context of screenwriting studies, attempts to produce knowledge that is useful even for professional practitioners as emerging research outputs can provide an understanding of the craft from the perspective of the individual writers, offer context for evolving industry practices, and contribute to understanding of concepts shared with fellow writers and industry professionals. While theoretical approaches may seem distant from practical work, they can inspire creativity or inform storytelling choices. This combination of scholarship and practice is made possible first of all thanks to the efforts of screenwriting teachers, who seek out and refine methods for educating a new generation of screenwriting students.

In line with “open ended” calls of the last two Screenwriting Research Network Conferences and in accordance with diverging trajectories of screenwriting research, the special issue of *Iluminace* gathers a colorful range of intents and approaches. It brings examination of the the working conditions and shifting status of the screenwriter. Martin Kos offers an article clarifying key features of screenwriting practice in a locally specific silent era environment, tracing negotiations about artistic autonomy and how the role of the screenwriter changed in sense of authorship as demonstrated by the case study of development of a Czechoslovak film adaptation *Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara* (Otec Kondelík a ženich Vejvara; Karel Anton, 1926). Complementing this historical perspective, scholar and screenwriter Maria Chiara Oltolini provides insiders reflection on a contemporary children’s TV series *The Sound Collector* (Sběratel zvuků; Lisa Arioli, Andy Burns, Barry Purves, and Chris Tichborne, 2023) and its genesis, focusing specifically on the function of the sound used as innovative storytelling device playing crucial role in the whole creative process. Given explorations of concrete projects — past and present screenwriting labor in mutually different creative industries —, raises also general questions about (dis)continuities and fundamental distinctions or similarities regarding screenwriters tasks and their creative inputs.

3) “CFP — 17th Annual SRN Conference — Adelaide, Australia,” *screenwritingresearch.com*, accessed September 10, 2025, <https://screenwritingresearch.com/2025/01/24/cfp-17th-screenwriting-research-network-conference/>.

Following these accounts, other contributors thoroughly investigate how screenwriting is adapting to new technologies and further exploring sensory dimensions beyond the visual. Rosamund Davies's article on virtual reality (VR) screenwriting looks at the unique challenges regarding audience engagement with VR narratives in terms of presence-immersion into the fictional world. Drawing inspiration from theater, videogames or prose fiction Davies emphasizes particularly the importance of strategic employment of the direct addressing of the viewer — i.e. use of the second person pronoun (in English) *you*. Similarly, Cecilie Levy's practice-based research seeking answers, how speech and sound can guide attention, stimulate interest and make the inner world of VR characters accessible to recipients. While Levy mainly scrutinizes dramaturgical device of voice-over and its practical applicability for current VR storytelling, Claus Tieber's historical inquiry concentrates on the specific screenwriting technique of rhythmization and musicalization of everyday noises, which can be traced in the USA and German screenplays from the early sound film era. His findings demonstrate how writers have long experimented with sound to create a more layered audiovisual experience. All three studies imply that for screenwriters the audience's sensory perception can be as important as the storytelling.

The issue also tackles the broader theoretical assumptions about the script as a non-static, constantly evolving text. Imran Firdaus's article about documentary movie *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* (Humaira Bilkis, 2022) introduces the concept of the "living script" — the entity which changes dynamically during the production process (writing, shooting, editing), capable flexibly and fruitfully interact with unpredictable reality which raises manifold ethical dilemmas and fostering profound emotional shifts. In addition to the above-mentioned peer reviewed studies is included Lucian Georgescu's interview with acclaimed filmmaker Cristi Puiu. The conversation reveals Puiu's observance and sensitivity to details from everyday life, which allows us to understand his approach to filmmaking and his work with style. Moreover, offers a filmmaker's personal reflections on death, the central theme of all of his artwork.

While the challenges outlined in the beginning of our editorial may paint a grim picture for the future of screenwriting, articles in the issue provides us with a crucial sense of perspective. The creative industries have faced similar shifts before — as Kos and Tieber explore: turn to adaptations and the advent of sound — and each time, storytellers have adapted, innovated, and endured. The anxieties of the past can give us hope that the profound problems of the present will also, in time, be solved.

A certain kind of screenwriting, perhaps the one defined by the golden age of streaming, may indeed be over. But new opportunities are already emerging — Davies and Levy implies that the fields like virtual and augmented reality demand a new kind of spatial and narrative logic that is deeply human. Furthermore, the very limitations of AI highlight the irreplaceability of the human screenwriter (at least for now). A large language models can mimic structure, but they cannot truly grasp the intricate experience of audience sensory perception — the subtle interplay of sight, sound, and pacing that elicits a visceral, emotional response, that reflects living of everyday life as can be seen in texts by Oltolini and Georgescu. It is this embodied, empathetic understanding that will remain the screenwriter's unique domain. As opportunities on established streaming platforms diminish, we

may be on the verge of a new wave of innovation, from micro-dramas⁴⁾ on emerging platforms to narrative forms we can't yet even imagine.

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