Hidden a-gender?: questions of gender in screenwriting practice

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the ways in which a screenplay might be 'gendered' or gender identified and, more specifically, how screenwriting *practice* is informed by, and performs, notions of gender. It asks, in what ways might screenplays be gendered? What is the role of gender in the individual screenwriter's own practice? And how might cultural assumptions around gender be enacted by and within screenwriting practices (especially mainstream script development processes) and discourse? The article discusses the potentially gendered biases of mainstream screenwriting frameworks (and the how-to market disseminating the same), and then the ways in which this impacts, in particular, the practices, perspectives and representations of women coming to the page, and also briefly examines the tactic of writing for gender-blind casting, concluding that this liberal feminist strategy does not address the inherent cultural assumptions at play in script development processes. Ultimately, the article argues that in cultural system that are inherently gendered, then gendered assumptions may underpin the commercial mainstream script development process.

KEYWORDS

screenwriting, gender, script development, feminism, screenwriting guides

Introduction

In the 'Notes on the text' at the start of his highly regarded screenwriting guide *Story*, Robert McKee states 'I use the non-exclusive "he" and "him" to mean "writer"' (1997, xi). He explains:

> I have avoided constructions that distract the reader's eye, such as the annoying alternation of "she" and "her" with "he" and "him" the repetitious "he and she" and "him and her" the awkward "s/he" and "her/im" and the ungrammatical "they" and "them" as neuter singulars (1997, xi).

Recently, and nearly two decades since the publication of *Story* (at the time of writing), the use of 'they/their' as a stand-in for the absence of a gender neutral third person singular personal pronoun has found legitimacy with journalistic style guides and linguists (Guo 2016). But the point to be made here pertains to McKee's assertion that masculine pronouns are non-exclusive (and, to a lesser extent, that any affordance of their feminine counterparts would only be distracting, annoying and repetitious). While unproblematically assuming a gender binary, and subsuming the 'Other' side of that dichotomy into the 'Absolute', McKee effectively (and affectively) excludes from the category of 'writer' anyone outside of a male identified subjective position.

Many of the screenwriting guides considered seminal will default to the masculine pronoun when discussing a screenplay's protagonist – see, just for one example, Snyder (2005) – but of interest here is McKee's specific ascription of the same to the *writer* who is, given the intended function of McKee's text, also almost certainly the reader. In other words, the text is intended to speak directly to the aspiring (or, indeed, experienced) screenwriter who reads the book and if that reader is anything other than male identified, she finds herself performing acts of mental translation throughout that experience. Despite McKee's claims to non-exclusivity, the very *experience* of his text then re-ascribes for the 'othered' reader (and 'writer') a hierarchical structure of gender whereby, as Susan J. Hekman points out, 'In each of the dualisms on which

Enlightenment thought rests, rational/irrational, subject/object, and culture/nature, the male is associated with the first element, the female with the second' (1992, 5). This article argues that mainstream script development processes are their own creative and cultural systems, sometimes informed by the orthodoxies distributed by the types of screenwriting guide noted above and almost certainly underpinned by the wider social and political thought within which they sit.

Christopher Pullen, writing specifically about queer screenwriters and queer screen characters suggests, 'Whether directly or indirectly, screenwriters write about themselves; or at the very least, they frame their personal ideas, contexts and skills in the mediation of a narrative' (2014, 285). This article, then, is concerned with the ways in which a screenplay might be 'gendered' or gender identified and, more specifically, how screenwriting *practice* is informed by, and performs, notions of gender. As a screenwriting practitioner and researcher with a particular interest in the ways feminist paradigms inform my own practice and how these ideas might be interrogated through screenwriting scholarship, I hope to explore broader ideas around gender through the lens of screenwriting and screenwriting practice – or, at the very least, pose some questions as an invitation for future scholarship. Given screenplays are themselves invitations to collaborate (Paul Schrader, cited by Hamilton 1990, ix), this article (and, indeed, this whole special issue) asks of screenwriting scholars: in what ways might screenplays be gendered? What is the role of gender in the individual screenwriter's own practice? And how might cultural assumptions around gender be enacted by and within screenwriting practices (including mainstream script development processes) and discourse?

Writing for and from sex and gender

While 'virtually every movie and TV show contains multiple, developed, relevant male characters who have some part in advancing the story' (Kesler 2010), the same is not true for female ones. In 2013 the University of Southern California released its fourth report commissioned by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media[1]. Using data gathered since 2007, '500 movies and over 21,000 speaking characters [were] content analyzed for gender prevalence' (Smith et al. 2013, 1). From the 2012 sample of 100 top-grossing films, the study concluded 'Females are grossly underrepresented […] Out of 4,475 speaking characters, only 28.4% are female' (Smith et al. 2013, 2) with '2012 reveal[ing] the lowest percentage of on-screen females across the 5-year sample' (Smith, et al. 2013, 3). Assessing the number of films where 'roughly half […] of all on-screen speaking characters are girls or women […] 6% of the top-grossing films in 2012 featured a balanced cast. Only two films had a higher percentage of females than males' (Smith et al. 2013, 3). It is probably not necessary to point out the report exposes a very real gender divide when it comes to on-screen representation in films coming out of Hollywood. The study was repeated in 2014, this time sampling popular films from eleven countries. It revealed 23.3% of protagonists to be female, with 30.9% female speaking characters (Smith, Choueiti & Pieper 2014, 4). As an Australian based researcher/practitioner, it is interesting for my purposes to note that Australian figures were slightly higher in the sample: 29.8% female characters, and 40% lead or co-lead characters (Smith, Choueiti & Pieper 2014, 3), and I will return to the Australian context shortly. For now, in the face of this evidence, it is reasonable to contend that if women are not present, then neither are their perspectives – an issue related to but not simply the same as representation.

Also, revealed in 2014 was a 7.5% increase in female representation 'with the inclusion of one or more female writers' (Smith, Choueiti & Pieper 2014, 23). The earlier study also reported an increase 'when at least one female is involved in the directing or writing process' (Smith et al. 2013, 7). By extension, these

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[1] The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, founded in 2004, has a particular focus on family films in its quest to reduce stereotyping and increase representation of female characters. Rigorous with its research and awareness raising efforts, the institute is active in commissioning studies, it runs a biennial symposium and, off its success with raising awareness through social media, earned a Global Impact Award from Google in 2013.

small gains in representation might also skew the gendered perspectives, but obviously, this is not something a data collection can quantify. However, it is worth remembering 'masculine values, attitudes, and aspirations remain intact, even as women become integrated into professional structures' (Cordeiro 2010, 490).

Moreover, as Lisa French puts it: 'the fact someone is female does not ensure a non-patriarchal view; women are as susceptible to having their world-view colonized by patriarchy as men are, and sex in itself does not ensure or suggest any differences of view' (2007, 11). It would follow, then, as screenwriter and leading scholar in the field of gendered screenwriting practice Helen Jacey points out, 'Producers and development executives, both male and female, might project their own experiences of women as well as their feelings about what women should be like onto the female character' (2010, 182). In other words, gender issues in screenplays encompass broad notions of screenwriting practice, extending to the processes of script development. French has asked, 'is there a difference in the subjectivity constructed by a woman, and that constructed by a man, in relation to representing female experience?' (2007, 48), but whether or not those writing for and from their own gendered subjectivity offers increased and relatable representations and perspectives is reinforced and contested within the interview based scholarship of, for example, Marsha Mccreadie (2006) and Linda Seger (1996).

Television screenwriter Suzette Couture observes, 'Of course men can write for women […] but I have come to believe there is a secret language of women, which speaks more directly to me. Sometimes when I watch a film I say to myself, "Only a woman […] would have written this"' (cited in Mccreadie 2006, 121). Tele-feature writer Susan Rice has said, '[Women's writing is] softer […] I do believe women's writing is more concerned with an interior life, with relationships' (cited in Mccreadie 2006, 121). By contrast, feature screenwriter Robin Swicord maintains:

> In all honesty, I'm not sure if a woman *can* write a woman's part better than a man. I hate it when something arrives at the door with a note appended, 'You write the girl's role and [writing partner and husband Nicholas Kazan] can write the guy's part'. We call it pink and blue thinking (cited in Mccreadie 2006, 4) (emphasis in original).

As noted earlier and explored elsewhere – see, for example, Taylor (2015, 2016) – writing representations, and writing *perspectives* of sex and/or gender are two different things. Though a liberal feminist ethos might suggest, as Tara Moss does here, that female under-representation can be positively addressed by casting women in roles written for men because 'many characters can change gender without influencing any central aspect of the plot' (2014, 116), this strategy unproblematically accepts a universal subjectivity and, in doing so, denies gendered subjectivities. Retrospectively attributing femaleness to a character conceived as a man falls well short of presenting the perspective of someone living in the world as a woman. While Moss makes a good point when she writes that such a tactic 'may even add a valuable, previously unexplored dynamic' (2014, 116) it may not be, as she suggests, such a 'simple change' (2014, p. 116). A move made popular by various online memes circulated on social media by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media since 2012, it might be said to contribute to feminist strategies that 'want what men have got, rather than questioning its value in any thorough sense' (Beasley 1999, 52). But if we were to question the value of a system that privileges the male perspective, we might suggest a new framework for developing female characters, rather than developing a strategy to include female characters within what exists already.

The casting of Sigourney Weaver as Ellen Ripley in *Alien* (1979) arose from a situation whereby screenwriters wrote all the parts for men - with an accompanying note advising 'the crew is unisex and all parts are interchangeable for men or women' (Torgovnick 2010). While this might be hailed as a win for meritocracy, Neda Ulaby points out that while director Ridley Scott attests 'The idea of making the hero a heroine was a masterstroke', he then continues 'because we truly expected Sigourney to be the first one to go' (2010). The masterstroke was not, it seems, putting the hero role in the hands of a woman per se. It was a

narrative trick to thrill an audience conditioned to seeing men as the conduits of the action. Jacey points out that in contemporary screenplays, 'It's as if we still want to give our heroes and heroines very different territory to roam in the worlds of our stories' (2010, 179) and Ulaby, interviewing commentator Alyssa Rosenberg (2010) about the casting of women in roles originally written for men (including the character of Kyle Pratt in 2005's *Flightplan*, reimagined as a woman by [Jodie Foster]), explains the significance of these movies' settings.

It's noteworthy that all the action in *Flightplan* and *Alien* takes place in tight, enclosed spaces […] Rosenberg points out that in both movies, the heroines aren't out roaming around – they're defending a tiny, confined piece of turf. 'I do think women are allowed to have their backs to the wall', Rosenberg says. 'But not to go out and *conquer* things. With men, you're allowed to be expansionary (2010).

Drawing a parallel between this literal space and the virtual tiny, confined piece of turf that women occupy in other films, might be as simple as considering, let us say, the 23.3% of female lead roles in the previously outlined study. Or it might be more useful to think about the other confines for female characters, and their perspectives. As Jacey puts it, 'It is all too easy to narrow the scope of your story ideas and concepts when you have a heroine in mind […] We are still risk averse in what we allow heroines to do and be' (2010, 179). Expanding that tiny piece of virtual turf available to female film characters, then, means thinking beyond the simple strategies of promoting gender diversity through inclusion via feminisms of equality. I take my cue here from Elizabeth Grosz who dissects Western Feminism into Equality (those feminisms that assert 'women should be able to do what men do') and Difference, or autonomy (feminisms concerned with recognising and valuing difference). As Beasley explains, the latter has 'no expectation that women should do what men do. Such feminists support conceptions of difference without hierarchy, difference without a norm, let alone a male norm' (1999, 42).

We might also consider that while such strategies use the term gender, what is really being discussed is sex. This, of course, opens up issues of essentialism, which are contentious even within the notion feminism itself, particularly around the sex/gender distinction, with various feminist theorists (and whole schools of feminist thought) concluding that while the concepts of sex and gender have 'the merit of stressing that gender is a social construction' they also have 'the demerit of turning sex into an essence' (Moi 2001, 4). While some feminisms reject the sex/gender distinction on that basis, others believe, to quote Toril Moi again, that an 'immobile, stable, coherent, fixed, prediscursive, natural and ahistorical' essence is exactly what the sex/gender distinction addresses (and negates) by 'distinguish[ing] between natural and cultural sex differences' (2001, 4-5). This is useful for feminists wanting to emphasize that 'while sex may be your anatomical type, gender brings with it a cluster of ideas to do with behavior, social status and expectations that are not natural or unavoidable extensions of those different bodily combinations' (Moss 2014, 130). Thus, strategies to increase female screen representation by casting women in parts originally written with men in mind, means redressing the balance of the sexes, but almost has nothing to do with the social influences that shape women (and men), or their gendered subjectivities.

While it may be true that the case against biological determinism predates the sex/gender distinction (Moi 2001, 5), to ignore it risks conflating what is understood to be female and what is understood to be feminine, thus it is usually important to nominate distinguishing definitions. Film scholar Lucy Bolton, for instance, employs 'the term "female" to discuss the sexed body of women, and "feminine" to refer to the symbolic codes and representations of what is considered to be female' (2011, 3). For the purposes of this argument, the sex/gender distinction feels important because of the different ways this research engages with (and critiques assumptions around) what women (and men) are 'like'. Tamar Jeffers McDonald, discussing male-centred romantic comedies and women-behaving badly 'raunch culture' narratives, points out that while these

films 'set out to insist the initial differences between the sexes can be overcome' they trade on gendered assumptions whereby 'all THEY (men) really want too is passionate sex in a committed loving relationship just like WE (women) do, and in the 'bad girl' ones, WE just want fun and sex and drink just like THEY do' (2007, 110) (emphases in original). Therefore, as she goes on to point out, 'Far from tapping in to a lessening of the gender divide […] this insistence on the similarity of the sexes seems instead to underline a real fear that the differences between man and women are either getting worse or have always been ineradicable' (2007, 110). While this article does not subscribe to fearful notions around sex-based difference, I do agree that attempts to universalise sexed and gendered experiences, as one might read the interchangeable casting project offered by liberal feminism, can serve to reinforce cultural assumptions and eradicate, or at least marginalise, 'othered' perspectives.

Gendered forms and cultural assumptions

There are, too, those arguments that the storytelling models to which screenplays perform, in the mainstream at least, are already gendered in their construction. Christopher Vogler acknowledges, of his own *The Writer's Journey*, 'There may be some masculine bias built into the description of the hero cycle since many of its theoreticians have been male […] There may be a real difference in the form of men's and women's journeys' (2007, xxi).[2] Both related and additional to this question of difference, is the potential resistance to its exploration, whereby the high 'status of masculine discourse in our culture means that it is easier to alienate the male section of the audience than the female' (Macdonald 1995, 59). In other words, the reluctance 'to tell women's stories [is] the assumption that while women can identify with both female and male characters, men can only identify with other men' (Moran 2015) which can impact upon the script development process, given this 'Usually occurs within pre-set parameters of norms, orthodoxies and institutions, and is subject to social and cultural conditions of production, including the exercise of individual power and of collaborative behavior' (Macdonald 2013, 5). It might then follow that these processes, operating as they are within the same culturally entrenched gendered structures, tend to pull the narrative toward a default, 'universal' perspective. This ongoing aspect of gendered script development has the self-perpetuating effect of both informing and being influenced by a societal obfuscation of female perspective. As actor Meryl Streep told an interviewer, 'The hardest thing […] is to have a story that [has] men in the audience feel[ing] like they know what I feel like' (Moran 2015).

But in terms of screenwriting forms, it is interesting to consider the ways in which these cultural and gendered assumptions might be embedded in the very tools by which we construct our screenplays. Of the pervasive three-act structure endorsed by most screenwriting discourse, Larissa Sexton-Finck writes:

> The problem this didactic structure has for women is that it propagates the   Enlightenment   notion of a universal subjectivity, based on free will and reason, which neutralises the power structures of society (and film) and repudiates the influence of social positioning on our opportunity for agency (2009, p. 65).

Moreover, the three-act structure demands a 'restorative final act [that] fixes female characters (and spectators) into a continuity of subjectivity by enforcing their reinstatement as an 'acceptable' semblance of femininity' (Sexton-Finck 2009, 65). Arguments for persevering with familiar and dominant models have to do with accessibility whereby our screenplays, after all, offer an opportunity for 'speaking to mainstream audiences about the context of their identity' (Pullen 2014, 271). Robin Wood suggests that gendered discourses might speak through such models because 'It remains unproven that the patriarchal language of

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[2] It should be noted that research and publications specifically responding to Vogler's work in this way include *The Virgin's Promise: Writing Stories of Feminine Creative, Spiritual, and Sexual Awakening* (2010) by Kim Hudson and *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness* (1990) by Maureen Murdock.

mainstream narrative film cannot be transformed and redeemed' (1990, 334). This is notable when considering 'Women go to the movies – it's one of the only demographics that is still growing at the moment' as Australian producer Sue Maslin (cited in Bizzaca 2015) has said recently (at the time of writing). She continued,

> The audiences want it, so when you have a film, whether it's gutsy heroines in action movies like *[The] Hunger Games* or the latest instalment of *Mad Max*, right through to *The Dressmaker* or comedies like *Trainwreck* or the Melissa McCarthy movies, right now there is a really clear appetite (Bizzaca 2015).

To write briefly then from within the Australian context it is interesting to note the building momentum around the production of more women's stories on screen. Hopscotch Pictures' producer and executive Troy Lum has said: 'I'd like to see Australian films more geared towards females to compete with the domination of the studios - we need to tell great female stories; we need female superheroes' (2013). Lum goes on to explain that he does not mean superhero in the conventional sense, suggesting: 'women want greater complexity. When I was thinking of what a great female superhero is now […], she's kind of like an ordinary woman that, kind of, wins the day' (2013). In January 2016, as part of its five point, $5 million-dollar plan over three years, Screen Australia's Gender Matters initiative announced the next step, which includes the Brilliant Stories funding program "for projects that satisfy the 'Three Tick Test' – ensuring that three out of four creative positions of producer, writer, director, and protagonist are female" (Screen Australia 2016). Notably, the protagonist – by definition, a fictional entity – is considered to be a 'creative position', alongside those of the producer, writer and director. It is not didacticism prompting me to point his out – after all, an actor would ultimately be engaged to depict this protagonist should the film go into production – but rather a wish to highlight the implied acknowledgement that a female character around which the narrative is centred is a significant consideration. Especially when moving toward a projection that 'by the end of 2018, Screen Australia aims to see [a significant amount of] production funding go to creative teams (writer, producer, director and protagonist) that are at least 50% female' (Bizzaca 2015). It is relevant for screenwriters of female protagonists, given that scripts inevitably enter a period of script development before being realised on screen, that this initiative acknowledges that there is a stigma to be overcome when centring a narrative upon a female character. As Maslin has said of seeking financing for *The Dressmaker*, 'I talked to a number of distributors and was constantly told that being a female skewed film limited its appeal' (cited in Bizzaca 2015).

Regardless, the screen industry includes those making a conscious choice to focus on women's experience in their stories, to better represent those perspectives. Screenwriter Anna Hamilton Phelan has said 'The question of responsibility is a balance that I struggle with all the time in my work. I have an enormous sense of responsibility to my gender' (cited in Seger 1996, p. 240). But there is no guarantee that such work will then go on to penetrate the mainstream. Maslin (cited in Bizzaca 2015) puts it this way:

> you can't just approach it at the supply end, you have to look at the business end. That is, the marketplace that is dominated by male exhibitors, distributors, and broadcasters. We've got to get them into the conversation and into the solution.

This article is centred upon screenwriting practice and, as such, cannot offer an extensive investigation into exhibition and distribution. Nonetheless, it must be informed by these issues, because the gendered biases that resist female skewed stories in the mainstream market also underpin and inform script development processes. These biases persist even as female centred films prove themselves to be increasingly viable, as the local box office figures in Australia for *The Dressmaker* attest[3]. In the case of *The Dressmaker*, this is not

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[3] $20,271,661 as reported on Screen Australia's list of the 100-top grossing Australian films of all time (Screen Australia 2016b).

necessarily a success matched critically, although it has been argued that it is its very 'femaleness' confounding reviewers. As Lisa Thatcher has written:

> This is a film written by a woman, directed by a woman based on a book by a woman, that is so ferociously from a female perspective, clusters of previously unknown to each other women can be seen speaking in hushed, astonished tones at its conclusion (2015).

Much of the scholarship around romantic comedies has already identified a critical predisposition toward female centred narratives, with terms such as 'chick flick' contributing to a reductive bias against 'popular women's films' which in fact 'are one of the few widely enjoyed (if derided) cultural forms that explore the pleasures and burdens of female identity' (Garrett 2012, 280). It might follow, then, that while screenplays may well be gendered in terms of perspectives, this is only made visible when these sit outside a 'universal' (male/masculine) referent. As the necessity for such initiatives as Gender Matters attest, gender gaps in screen stories evolve out of cultural biases inherent in script development processes and may even be built into the very structures of screenwriting practice.

Conclusion

'The screenwriter' according to Craig Batty and Susan Kerrigan, is 'deeply positioned, both literally and theoretically, as an embedded and conditioned agent inside a cultural production and creative system' (2016, 134). This article has argued that this 'cultural system' is inherently gendered, therefore if script development is 'a process in which ideas, emotions and personalities combine […] to create, refine and tell a story in the best way possible and *under the circumstances at the time'* (2016, 132) (emphasis added), then there are almost certainly gendered assumptions always underpinning those circumstances, at least in the commercial mainstream.

This article set out to ask some questions and explore some of the ways in which screenplays may be gendered, particularly how the language of screenwriting guides can serve to perpetuate the entrenched cultural assumptions built into the dominant formats. The role of gender in the individual screenwriter's own practice deserves its own study, however, this article has drawn from the interview-based work of Seger, Mccreadie and others to briefly examine this from the female perspective, whereby women in the screenwriting industry have a range of perspectives on how their 'femaleness' might contribute, or not, to their writing practice. Couture believes, 'No woman wants to admit that […] we may be that different from men. Besides, if you say that you may be losing some work by limiting yourself that way' (cited in Mccreadie 2006, 121). French likewise identifies 'a long history of women resolutely resisting labels, insisting on equality and on being regarded as people, rather than as women – perhaps for fear that acknowledgement of gender will prevent them from claiming a place as a creative person on their own terms' (2007, 42). In other words, while male screenwriters do not have to deny their subjectivity as men, but it is something women must negotiate frequently. Of female filmmakers who resist the very notion of being 'female' filmmakers, French observes that among the factors leading to this resistance is 'a profound boredom arising from having this question repeatedly directed at them […] and a desire not to be creatively limited by being regarded as only being able to express one point of view' (2007, 43). These positions, then, leave women feeling they have to deny their female subjectivity, and therefore work to negate female experience. As Moi points out, the issues that give rise to this resistance are still very feminist concerns. She proposes that 'Because male subjectivity is not "hailed" […] in this way, this alienating choice in fact defines women's situation under patriarchy' and that 'a genuinely feminist position would refuse either option and insist, rather, that women should not have to choose between calling themselves women and calling themselves writers' (2001, 206).

Asking how cultural assumptions around gender might be enacted by and within screenwriting practices and discourse, this article touched on recent gains made (at the time of writing) for female practitioners, representation and perspectives in the Australian. It also critiqued the tactic of writing for gender-blind casting, concluding that this liberal feminist strategy does not address the inherent gender biases at play in script development processes, rather paying off increased representations by erasing female perspectives and subjectivities. This article raised and explored some questions about screenwriting and gender from a female/feminist standpoint and eagerly anticipates further research from broader notions of gender. That said, while the discussion centred upon the effects and *experience* of script development and screenwriting practice from a female perspective, this article offers the argument that wider gendered biases defaulting to so-called 'universal' perspectives inflect the development of screenplays in gendered ways. Within the creative and cultural system that is 'script development, in terms of the mainstream processes drawing upon doxa disseminated by dominant screenwriting models and conventions, are potentially inbuilt biases, reflecting those enacted in the wider social and cultural sphere – and creating screenplays that feed right back into it.

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